

WILLIAM A. LITTLE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
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JOHN CHAMBER
DEPUTY EXECUTIVE, KING COUNTY

INTERVIEWEE: JOHN CHAMBER

INTERVIEWERS: WILLIAM LITTLE

SUBJECTS: TYREE SCOTT; KING COUNTY; JOHN SPELLMAN; SHUTDOWNS; DEMONSTRATIONS; VIOLENCE; KING COUNTY PROSECUTOR; CHARLES O'CARROLL; JOSEPH MCGAVICK; ASSOCIATED GENERAL CONTRACTORS; CENTRAL CONTRACTORS ASSOCIATION; BLACK CONSTRUCTION WORKERS; POLICE; VIOLENCE; UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON; AIRPORT

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[00:00:00] **JOHN CHAMBER:** Specifically you want to deal with that meeting we had and—

[00:00:05] **WILLIAM LITTLE:** Not really, talk about all the other incidents also just start with that.

[00:00:10] **JOHN:** Okay, I'll start with that because it was—the reason being, is it, it didn't turn out to be what I envisioned at all. All I was trying to do at the dinner of my home was just allowing several of us to relax and enjoy ourselves because we'd been so closely associated in a very tense situation. And my intention was to invite all the leaders and the contractors and their wives, and I guess [Joseph] McGavick was there and his wife. It was to be a social event and not a business situation. And as it turned out, McGavick and I were the only ones who had our wives, and all the rest of the people came expecting it to be a very serious conversation. [laughs]

So it wasn't quite what I'd envisioned. It was just really an effort to take some heat off of all of us and rest for a while. There were some rather lengthy conversations that all involved the activities we were involved in, so it really didn't take the heat off anything.

You know, Bill, I can't—it's difficult for me to remember the sequence of events. I do remember this about—I'm going to have to generalize on a thing, maybe I can come back with some specifics. That at least as far as we were concerned, those of us were involved in the [King County Executive John] Spellman administration at that time, McGavick and myself in particular. And I'm sure John Spellman felt the same way, although he was not quite as outspoken and had to be somewhat more reserved. All of us felt very strongly about the cause that the contractors were representing. What they were representing was Black employees, more than anything else, even though that was not their initial activity, that's the way it ended up. And those of us who were working on the thing, at least from the County standpoint, even though we were supposed to be in an adversary position, actually were in a very sympathetic position, as far as employment of minorities were concerned.

And so, our general activities were very much in effort to accomplish the principles of the contractors we're trying to establish. And it almost turned out as though our meetings with the Associated General Contractors who were the main representatives—Well, Associated General Contractors and the unions showed up later. We were almost there. Rather than being in the middle, we were shaded to the side of the contractors. Quite frankly, we spent a considerable amount of time in our own back rooms trying to position the county and the administration. Keep the heat on the Associated General Contractors and the unions to move to give in order to allow for the employment of minorities, no matter what, or to assure the employment of minorities.

We were—I recall having a great deal of difficulty in that effort because of the legal counsel that was provided by the prosecutor's office who had no sympathy with our position at all. That was within Charles O'Carroll, who was prosecutor at King County, and took a very narrow view of our legal ability to make any demands, or even to participate in such a thing. But in any event, before the thing was finally over, we demanded and did receive reluctant legal assistance to the development of any documents that might be necessary.

I'm trying to remember what documents they were at the moment, I've forgotten the nature. Maybe you remember, I'm sure you have access to what developed out of that, finally into the courts and so on. It was a plan for employment. I gather what you want is impressions more than anything, because that's about all I have at the moment. The specifics would come back if I talked about it long enough, but I'm not sure I can talk that long.

At the time, I can recall being deeply concerned about the position of Lem Howell in the thing who was almost, who we considered almost overshooting his position. In other words, he was creating a situation in which the people were being polarized to the point that they were obtaining less than they would have obtained otherwise. And we talked to the contractors about that on occasion, but perhaps they should temper their council's activities to some extent, in order to move farther ahead. And as I recall, they did, and it did help, to some extent.

I just forgot so much of it.

[00:06:49] **WILLIAM:** Okay, how do you—what was your impression of Tyree Scott during this period of time? He was just chairman of the CCA [Central Contractors Association] at that particular time. As a leader of that organization? What effect did he have, positive or negative?

[00:07:12] **JOHN:** Well, from our perspective, our thoughts about Tyree were, at least mine—I can only speak for myself, McGavick will speak for himself on the subject—I thought Tyree was doing an excellent job of representing his cause at that time. I thought, subsequent to that, some of the other things he participated in I wasn't too pleased with, but at that time, I thought he was adequately representing the situation. I didn't doubt his need to do what he did in order to create some action.

Much of what went on—let me explain why I say that—much of what went on in the way of what would be considered violent activities, or semi-violent activities, we were aware of. We had our lines of communication open. We were well aware of what was going to happen. We felt as though we could depend upon Tyree to keep those actions within a range of activity that would do no great harm to anyone, but we full well recognized that whatever he was going to do probably had to take place in order to prove his point. And so, from our position, we were more in the mode of saying, “Tyree, we we know you've got to do this, but on the other hand, we're in the position of having to maintain a certain semblance of order, and therefore our law enforcement agencies will have to take these steps.” We tried to keep each other informed on what steps would have to be taken in order to avoid any kind of a confrontation which would be out of control. In a large part, it worked. The airport thing at one time did get a bit beyond what anyone had imagined. But that's the only instance I can remember in which things went beyond what we would have thought might have happened. I think that was the first airport incident. There were two of them. The second one was everything we expected to happen. And on Tyree's side, it was the same thing.

[00:10:16] **WILLIAM:** Okay, in terms of the first airport incident, in terms of moving on the runway path outside, was there much communication between the county and the Port of Seattle?

[00:10:41] **JOHN:** No, that was one of the problems. That one, as I recall, came as somewhat of a surprise. This is my hazy memory. That incident was somewhat of a surprise. The communication between the port and King County was not all that good. Additionally, who was going to control the situation was not clear. I'm getting two of them mixed up because it's been so long ago. We did have some conversations with the Port. Let's see if I can resurrect one of them.

[00:11:38] **WILLIAM:** The second incident, they brought in people from all over the area, from all these small municipalities.

[00:11:45] **JOHN:** Yeah, that's right.

[00:11:46] **WILLIAM:** They were supposed to be ready for any kind of action. And I was just wondering, what was the difference between the first and the second? Because they responded differently. This first one, there wasn't any beating at all, the second one there was a series of beatings of demonstrators and protestors.

[00:12:15] **JOHN:** By the time—We knew the second one was coming, and we knew much more about what was going to happen. There were conversations held the night before, as I recall, communication both ways, saying, “We'll just have to do this, if this happens,” and so on and so forth. And even though there may have been some incidents in the second one, it was the kind of thing that didn't ever seem to go beyond the script that both of us had in mind. I'm trying to remember the name of a priest who was involved. His name around here, he was also involved in some of the conversations in the background prior to that.

[00:13:34] **WILLIAM:** Well let me go back, awhile back, and talk about after the shutdown of the hospital on the [Capitol] Hill. And I think John [Spellman] had a meeting with a whole series of people: himself, McGavick, Ben McAdoo, Jim Takisaki, Tyree, [?L.B. Carey?] I think, and somebody else. And at that time, he was trying to negotiate an agreement between the various parties, and the alternate decision was John shut down

the hospital job, he was trying to negotiate the job contract. And he shut down, and the AGC didn't really want him to shut down, the union definitely didn't want to shut down. Could you try to recall or recapture some of the things that was involved in that meeting, and people, what position they put forth?

[00:14:39] **JOHN:** You're talking about that particular meeting?

[00:14:44] **WILLIAM:** Because I got some information from Jim Takisaki to the fact that him and Joe went out through the room. He went out and Joe came out, and they talked outside the room about what was potential for violence, and certainly the job closure potential, if the job wouldn't close down. And Takisaki, showed there were plenty of potential for a tremendous amount of violence if that job was to shut down, but I didn't get into the discussion, into the meeting, now, before that decision was made.

[00:15:31] **JOHN:** Bill, I just can't remember right. It's been too long.

[00:15:35] **WILLIAM:** Go back and jog his memory. [laughs]

[00:15:38] **JOHN:** It's just been too long. There were quite a few meetings, and the vividness of each one of them is gone at this point. The potential of violence was there all the way through.

[00:15:56] **WILLIAM:** Sometimes it was greater, and other times less, because of the relationship and the communication that was involved in the whole process, which is—it's not really known an awful lot that this was a fairly orchestrated type of script process, orchestrated type of play.

[00:16:23] **JOHN:** No, I don't suppose they do.

[00:16:24] **WILLIAM:** [laughs] Which is really...

[00:16:29] **JOHN:** When the unions finally got geared up, they were accusing us of that, of favoring contractors more than themselves. That had tremendous political ramifications, you must be well aware by now, for Spellman.

[00:16:48] **WILLIAM:** [?Every time?] . Yeah.

[00:16:59] **JOHN:** I don't know if they ever did recover from that, as far as the unions are concerned. Well, except that some of their leadership is now no longer existent.

[00:17:14] **WILLIAM:** Well, actually, if you go back into this whole case stage.

[00:17:19] **JOHN:** That's between our responsibility to maintain civil order and our strong feelings that something had to be done, as far as the employment of minorities was concerned. And to maintain any kind of balance in those two was really a tremendous pressure. I suppose when it comes right down to it, I was primarily responsible for, at that time, for maintaining the civil order, as far as our whole law enforcement agency was concerned, and also precluding, on their end, any kind of violent activity which was out of the realm of responsibility. And so I was constantly involved with the then-sheriff, who was Jack Porter, and also his tactical squad.

My communication with them was very close at the time, trying to maintain a strategy whereby they would avoid situations in which people were going to be severely wounded or abused and that sort of thing. We were coming out of an experience then of the Seattle Police Department having done some pretty violent things, and we just didn't want our people to assume the same. In fact, the Seattle Police Department was totally out of

control at times, and some other activities, as I recall, they turned into a riot, rather than the—Yeah, oh God, we were concerned about not duplicating that situation. And I thought our own our own law enforcement agencies, was substantially reserved and quite mature, and how they handled things, not that people didn't get hurt, to some extent they did. The extent of that was minimal compared to what it might have been, but they've acted fairly responsibly. And also the people who were trying to demonstrate, yeah, that's right, but when I mentioned that we had confidence in Tyree, it was that kind of confidence that he could maintain a level of control that would avoid a situation that was completely beyond the realm of sort of losing. And he did, to this day, I admire him for his ability to keep that thing. I assume that it was him, there were other leaders involved in it.

[00:20:09] **WILLIAM:** Okay.